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A Christian Response to *Boko Haram* Insurgency in Nigeria

GWAMNA DOGARA JE'ADAYIBE

Abstract

Nigeria, particularly the north-eastern region, has been the target of a sustained Islamist terrorist onslaught for many years, leading to massive human casualties, the loss of property, and destabilisation of socio-economic, religious and cultural processes. A major target of these attacks have been Christians and churches. This paper attempts to address some of these disturbing trends with specific focus on the Boko Haram Islamic insurgency group, which has attracted scholarly discourse since its formation, growth and spread. Diverse views have emerged as to its etymology, intentions, factors for their emergence, and source of growth and sponsors. This paper examines the historical response of the Christian church to such attacks and draws lessons for the church in Nigeria. It highlights the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation in the restoration of peace and healing of affected communities. It also argues for a broad-based and multi-pronged response including political and legal options and vigorous advocacy.

KEY WORDS: Boko Haram, Terrorism, Christian response to persecution, Political leadership

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Introduction

Nigeria has witnessed unprecedented cases of terrorism inspired by the Islamic group, *Boko Haram* in its recent history. The activities of *Boko Haram* have resulted in the loss of thousands of lives, and destruction of property, particularly in some parts of northern Nigeria. *Boko Haram's* activities have become more endemic in most parts of the northeast states of Nigeria (Adamawa, Borno and Yobe) who have been under the state of emergency since 2013. Christians have been exposed to the vagaries of *Boko Haram* as they have become targets, their churches burnt down, including schools, hospitals and homes. Countless number of Christians have been killed. In the eyes of Christians in Nigeria, *Boko Haram* has a subtle agenda of a deliberate war on them as they seek to foster their Islamic caliphate dreams. It could be said that at no time in Nigeria's history have the Christians been challenged to respond to perceived persecution and trials, which require biblical and globally acceptable norms more than in this age.

John L. Allen Jr. captures this scenario when he notes that, "Just as Africa leads the pack in terms of Christian growth, it has also become one of the primary fronts in the global war on Christians."¹ The focus on the "global war" on Christians is shifted to Nigeria due to its high mix of Christian-Muslim population which Cardinal John O. Onaiyekan refers to as "Islam-Christian nation,"² or Imam Sani Isah who sees Nigeria as "Saudi-Arabia and the Vatican rolled into one."³ For some, Nigeria is a "religious jungle, with so many religions and sects canvassing more or less noisily for adherents."⁴ Nigeria has been acclaimed as one of the most religious nations in the world who have impressive records of "multiple fronts in the global war on Christians,"⁵ and has also witnessed intense religious conflicts and crises. This paper attempts to address some of these disturbing trends with specific focus on the *Boko Haram* Islamic insurgency group. *Boko Haram* has attracted scholarly discourse since its formation, growth and spread. Diverse views have emerged as to its etymology, intentions, factors for their emergence, and source of growth and sponsors.

Popular literal translation of *Boko Haram* derives from *Boko*, the Hausa word for formal western education or form of knowledge, and *haram*, an Arabic word for "anything that is unlawful and forbidden." When combined or

¹ John L. Allen Jr., *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Frontlines of Anti-Christian Persecution*, Image, New York, 2013, p.49.

² John Cardinal O. Onaiyekan, *Seeking Common Grounds: Inter-Religious Dialogue in Africa*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi, 2013, p.170.

³ John L. Allen Jr., *The Global War on Christians*, p.55.

⁴ John Cardinal O. Onaiyekan, *Seeking Common Grounds*, p.35.

⁵ John L. Allen Jr., *The Global War on Christians*, p.49.

joined, *Boko Haram* is translated as “western education is unlawful, forbidden or sinful.” Abdallah Uba Adamu has provided what could be considered a slightly different but deeper meaning of *Boko Haram* when he states that:

The word “boko,” according to the most authoritative lexicon of Hausa language has 11 meanings, all but one of which gravitate around the first, which is: doing anything to create impression that one is better off, or that is of better quality or larger in amount than is the case. In other words, deception. The last meaning (no 11) given to the word by Bargery is for “English book,” but the classical definition of “boko” retained in its original meaning, at least in colonial period is deception. Thus technically, “boko haram” means “deceptive knowledge which is sinful,” not “western education is sin.”⁶

The *Boko Haram* Islamic group prefers to be known as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'wati Wal-Jihad*, meaning, “people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and Jihad.” They are also called Yusuffiya Movement, after their founder Mohammed Yusuf. *Boko Haram* was founded around 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf. They draw membership “largely of hundreds of impoverished northern Islamic students and clerics as well as university students and professionals, many of whom are unemployed.”⁷

Shehu Sani, in *The Killing Fields*, has shown how a terrorist type of religious fundamentalist group, the Yobe Talibans, provided grounds for *Boko Haram* to be born from 1995 to 1996, and 2002.⁸ Sani also provided a panoramic chronicle of some ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria and how some of them were precursors of targets on Christians through killings, destruction of churches and Christian symbols.⁹

Today, *Boko Haram* has become one of the terrorist groups in the world with external links with Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, Hezbollah, Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali, Libya, and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). *Boko Haram* has also wreaked severe havoc through bombings and other terrorist activities that have left hundreds of people dead, destroyed property and perpetrated fear and agony among its victims.

It is to be noted that some Nigerian political observers and commentators

⁶ Abdallah Uba Adamu, “Insurgency in Nigeria: The Northern Nigerian Experience,” in Olu Obafemi and Habu Galadima (eds.), *Complex Insurgencies in Nigeria*, National Institute, Kuru, 2013, p.100.

⁷ Jidefor Adibe, “Boko Haram: One Sect, Conflicting Narratives,” *African Renaissance*, Vol. 9 No. 1, 2012, p.51.

⁸ Shehu Sani, *The Killing Fields: Religious Violence in Northern Nigeria*, Spectrum Books, Ibadan, 2007, pp.82, 181-183.

⁹ Ibid., pp.62-185

perceive the birth and growth of *Boko Haram* as the fallout of the introduction of Sharia in some parts of Northern Nigeria from 1999. This is explained in two ways: First, it is perceived that the unrestrained introduction and its implementation in some states in northern Nigeria by government, and the lack of courage to stop or discourage its implementation by the Federal Government, gave courage to *Boko Haram* to take laws into their hands and to confront and even challenge Nigeria's government. Second, what has given *Boko Haram* its vehemence and potency is the perceived failure of Sharia in its true essence as was envisaged by Muslims in Nigeria, particularly in the implementing states.

It is generally acknowledged today by observers and commentators in Nigeria that Sharia has refused to work effectively as a result of the political undercurrents that informed its introduction and implementation and due to the corrupting factors of the Nigerian state. These are pertinent flaws that the *Boko Haram* have hinged their grievances on, pressing for a true Sharia that is apolitical and stripped of all selfish and corrupt influences.

Others have tried to locate the genesis of *Boko Haram* in the unchecked rise and proliferation of armed gangs in Nigeria such as the Bakassi Boys, Odua Peoples' Congress (OPC), Egbesu Boys, Niger Delta militants and political thugs which fostered violence and killings particularly from 1999 when the military quit the political arena. A brief reference to some of the activities of *Boko Haram* will help to illustrate the assertions that have been made above for purposes of illustration.

***Boko Haram* Activities and their Rhetoric**

Nigeria has witnessed several ethno-religious crises in the last four decades that have pitched Christians and Muslims against each other. Apart from the *Maitatsine* riots in Kano in 1980 which was intra-religious, ethno-religious crises have occurred as a result of serious conflicts, disagreements and contestations between Christians and Muslims that have resulted in loss of many lives and destruction of property. Examples of some ethno-religious conflicts include, Kafanchan religious riots in 1987; Tafawa Balewa in 1991; Kano, 1991; Zangon Kataf, 1992, 2000; Sharia crisis of 2000; Jos crisis in 2001, 2008, 2010; and the "Danish Cartoon" riots in 2006 among others. Shehu Sani has provided a chronicle of some of these ethno-religious crises and shown how little disagreements over what could be considered trivial matters, that is, non-essential doctrinal contests, have led to such incidences.¹⁰

Similarly, I have noted in a closely related paper how Nigeria has witnessed growing trends of religious intolerance occasioned by rise in religious

¹⁰ Shehu Sani, *The Killing Fields*, pp.67, 68, 71, 81, 82, 83, 95, 96, 106, 109, 110, 111, 115, 116-118, 121-123, 134, 157, 160, 169-170, 171.

fundamentalism, religious extremism, and radicalization of religion fuelled by manipulation of religion by Nigeria's political elite.¹¹ In fact, it could be argued that the government's inability or failure to radically address the menace of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria contributed to the unprecedented rise of the *Boko Haram* group. This is because the present "weaponization," that is, arms proliferation in Nigeria, grew from the incessant cases of ethno-religious conflicts, and unchecked rise in intolerant religious dispositions of Nigerians as had been exhibited in some ethno-religious clashes, and thus providing *Boko Haram* with the basis to kill Christians and security officials without let or hindrance.

Boko Haram's activities have created fear among Nigerians today and promoted a culture of violence. A generation of children is being raised under such environment that has taught them not to respect human life and civilised human values. To put it bluntly, *Boko Haram* is really thriving on impunity, criminality and lawlessness that are encapsulated in evil (*haram*), which their name implicitly denotes.

Boko Haram has used Nigeria's porous borders to move in illegal weapons, recruit non-Nigerians into their fold, and as escape routes. Dipo Onabanjo has noted that Nigeria has a total of 3,770 kilometres of shared land borders between its neighbours such as Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin Republic.¹² He states that:

The illicit trade in small arms, light weapons and ammunition wrecks havoc everywhere, mob terrorising a neighbourhood, rebels attacking civilians or peacekeepers, drug lords randomly killing law enforcers or anyone else interfering with their illegal business (and) bandits hijacking humanitarian aid conveyances.¹³

In fact it is believed that there are about ten million illegal weapons in West Africa and 70% of them are found in Nigeria.¹⁴

It is to be noted that Christians do not encourage or accept immorality or corruption in governance in any form, as the Bible is replete with passages which condemn such vices, but see *Boko Haram's* rhetorical postures on these evils and its attacks on Christians as not only hypocritical but misplaced

¹¹ Gwamna Dogara Je'adayibe, "The Turning Tides of Religious Intolerance in Nigeria: The External Connections and Internal Dynamics," in Olayemi Akinwumi, Sati U. Fwatshak and Okpeh O. Okpeh Jr. (eds.), *Historical Perspectives in Nigeria's Post Colonial Conflicts*, Unimark Ltd, Lagos, 2007.

¹² Dipo Onabajo, "How Illegal Arms Threatens Nigeria's Unity," *Tell*, September 10, 2012, p.47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.46.

aggression and diversionary, filled with flagrant contradictions.

For instance, if *Boko Haram* is truly opposed to western education and its values and attainments, why the use of telephones, videos, computers, maps, guns, bombs, motorcycles and cars? Don't all of these have corrupting influences which the *Boko Haram* have also used corruptly to commit *haram* activities? Were these things not provided as a result of western advancement and technology? Is manipulation of the Scriptures, such as the Qur'an itself, not *haram*? What of other *haram* activities such as rape, forced conversion, sex slavery and wanton murders that are anti-Islamic? Does the Qur'an not teach about relating with the *ahl kitab*, "People of the Book"? (see Qur'an 3:64, 3:65, 60:8). Does Islam not share commonalities with Christianity on justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and humanity, among others?

On *Boko Haram* Rhetoric

Boko Haram has become notoriously popular due to their grievances with the Nigerian state, popularly referred to as the "*Boko Haram* rhetoric." These are reasons and propaganda they have employed to recruit membership, draw sympathisers and sponsors both nationally and internationally. A few are identified briefly.

- i. Alleged corruption in Nigeria. *Boko Haram* has been driven by their condemnation of corruption in Nigeria, which has reached very high levels. Corruption has become a pervasive feature of Nigeria and attained a cancerous levels. Virtually every sector of Nigeria's public space today has been corrupted. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index has over the years, consistently ranked Nigeria as one of the most corrupt nations in the world. Corruption has been made possible and fostered by the ruling (political) elite who have reduced other Nigerians to abject poverty, unemployment and misery. The ruling elite are products of western education which have taught them "smart ways" of brazenly abusing power and exploiting religion for their corrupt purposes. As such, only Sharia can salvage Nigeria from its current quagmire.
- ii. Failure of leadership. *Boko Haram* insurgents have accused the political elite in Nigeria of its inability to produce good leadership and purposeful governance that will propel Nigeria to greatness. It is *Boko Haram's* belief that the Nigerian educated elite are to be blamed for the country's leadership crisis. The way out, they argue, is to establish an Islamic caliphate that will be ruled by the true dictates of Islam in order to foster justice, equity, prosperity and right living.
- iii. Western education is evil or sin. One of *Boko Haram's* major antics or

rhetoric, from which their name is derived, is the rejection of western forms of education. To *Boko Haram*, Western education corrupts morality and distorts the basic tenets of Islam. It condemns Western theories of creation as propounded by Charles Darwin, secularism and increasing influences of globalization that have promoted obscenity, prostitution, consumerism and capitalism, and Western imperialist occupation of Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, and other forms of “aggression on Arab or Islamic countries.” This “conspiracy theory” rejects anything Western, which is conceived as evil and un-Islamic, and which should therefore be opposed and completely eliminated. Therefore, *Boko Haram* rejects Nigeria's secular constitution, which they see as Western imposed, and colonialism, the imperialist tool of the West. They also reject the Western form of democracy and human rights. *Boko Haram* adherents have alleged injustices in Nigeria particularly targeted at the Muslims. They point at social inequities, education imbalance between North and south, unemployment, and poverty.

A reflection on some of these grievances raises some posers worthy of consideration. Since Sharia was reintroduced in some parts of northern Nigeria, has it not failed or lost steam despite the zeal and similar rhetoric that had characterised its reintroduction in the first place? Did Christians not warn and foresee the political rather than the religious undercurrents of sharia which was doomed to fail? Did Christians not warn that sharia was a smokescreen of a bigger grand design to Islamize Nigeria which the *Boko Haram* insurgents are pushing for and have held on to? Are Christians and other Nigerians not victims of Nigeria's leadership crisis or unemployment, poverty and injustices in the land?

Answers to these and other pertinent questions will help to situate *Boko Haram* properly with regard to their intentions, and the place of Christians, vis-à-vis the plan to completely Islamize them in Nigeria.

In reflecting on *Boko Haram's* rhetoric, it is indeed instructive to note the sheer hypocrisy and crass display of ignorance of Islamic history and antecedents that marked the contributions of Islam to world civilization and in some cases, influenced Western civilization in one form or the other. For instance, Sani Abubakar Lugga has rightly stated that:

The Abbasids were influenced by the Quranic and Hadith injunctions that stress the value of knowledge. During this period, the Muslim world became the unrivalled intellectual centre of science, philosophy, medicine and education, as the Abbasids championed the cause of knowledge and established the equivalent of today's university called, *Baitul Hikmah* (house of wisdom) in Baghdad, where both Muslim and non-Muslim

scholars gathered and translated all the world's knowledge into the Arabic language¹⁵

Lugga shows how the Muslim world “improved on the knowledge gained from the ancient Roman, Chinese, Indian, Persian, Egyptian, North African, Greek and Byzantine civilizations.”¹⁶

It is also true that Muslim scientists made significant advances in mathematics and astronomy. In what he calls, “the pinnacle of Islamic civilization,” Lugga provides Western misrepresentation of facts to refute western claim of landmark achievements in history which go back to Islamic civilization. For example:

i. **The Western claim:** The first mention of man in flight was Roger Bacon who drew a flying apparatus around 1250 A.D.

The Fact: Abbas Ibn Firnas of Islamic Spain (Andalusia) invented, constructed and tested a flying machine around 800 A.D.

ii. **The Western claim:** Gunpowder was developed in the western world as a result of Roger Bacon's works in 1242.

The Fact: Researchers and historians such as Reinuad and Fave had shown that gunpowder was formulated initially by Muslim Chemists.

iii. **The Western claim:** That Robert Boyle in the 17th century, originated the science of chemistry.

The Fact: A variety of Muslim chemists, including Ar-Razi, al Jabr (the founder of Algebra), Al-Biruni and al-Kindi, performed experiments in chemistry some 700 years before Boyle.¹⁷

Islamic civilization contributed immensely to the development and growth of other forms of knowledge in medicine, astronomy, engineering, geography, philosophy, and mathematics, among others.¹⁸ Ironically, today, most authoritative scholarly works on the history of the Arabs and Islam are by Western scholars who the *Boko Haram* adherents detest with much vehemence.

Christians have experienced persecution since the beginning of Christianity. Christians were subjected to all forms of trials and persecution from the brutal Roman emperors such as Nero, Claudius, Domitian, Diocletian, and Hadrian.

¹⁵ Sani Abubakar Lugga, *This is Islam: The True Perspective of Islam Against the Jaundiced Image it is Being Given Today*, Lugga Press Ltd, Katsina, 2014, p.19.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.19.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.22.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.23-24.

E. M. B Green has shown that Christians inherited martyrdom from the Jewish heritage which dominated its outlook in the Seleucid struggle of the inter-testamental years. 4 Maccabees 17:8 refers to this: "But I can demonstrate it best from the noble bravery of those who died for the sake of virtue, the Eleazar and the seven brothers and their mother."¹⁹

Examples of early Christian persecution could be drawn from the Edict of Diocletian which finds parallels in the Nigerian context today. In 303 A.D. Diocletian issued an edict which resulted in the destruction of Christian scriptures and places of worship, prohibited Christians from assembling for worship, led to the arrest of Christian clergy, demanded homage and sacrifices to Roman gods and goddesses, and sentences of torture and death passed on Christians who refused to renounce the Christian faith. The resolve of *Boko Haram* to stamp out Christianity in Nigeria, and which has made Christians the prime target of their attacks, is replica of early Christian persecution under Diocletian and other emperors.

Today, we are experiencing what can be called the "globalization of terror," which has heightened since the 9/11 events in the United States of America. The activities of terrorists around the world, including Muslim countries, depict the level of manipulation of religion garbed in political Islamism rather than Islamic resurgence in its pure form. For some observers, it is a case of "clash of civilizations" gone too far.

Incessant ethno-religious crises in Jos show how Christians have suffered or been targeted in one form or the other, something that has been closely replicated in *Boko Haram's* activities. For example, in the Yelwa-Shendam crises of 2003, terrorist-like and guerrilla attacks targeted and killed Christian worshipers in the early morning. Similarly, the bombing of the Jos ultra-modern market in 2004 could be seen as the precursor of *Boko Haram* activities on Christian businesses and trade. There have been sporadic attacks and killings in some Plateau villages such as Riyom, Rim, Barkin Ladi, Kwall, Maza, and Dogo Na Hauwa among other villages. Such attacks and killings have also occurred in some parts of southern Kaduna with a predominantly Christian population. That unmasked "gunmen" and "herdsmen" raid villages to kill and raze houses is an indication of Nigeria's security hypocrisy and inability to track down perpetrators.

N. R. Needham has indicated that "the Islamic faith, from its origin to the present day, has almost always posed the greatest political and military threat, and the most awe-inspiring missionary challenge, to the followers of Jesus Christ."²⁰ Needham however, noted that Prophet Muhammad recognised non-

¹⁹ E.M.B Green, "Persecution," I.H. Marshall, and others eds, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd Edition, IVP, Leicester, London, 2007, p.902.

²⁰ N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power: Part Two: The Middle Ages*, Grace

Muslims amidst them as “people of the Book,” where there was some level of religious tolerance.²¹ Needham further shows how Christians flourished under Muslim rule in Persia, “where Muslim rulers employed Nestorian Christian scholars to translate the great works of Greek philosophy into Arabic, thus channelling the wisdom of ancient Greece into the new world of Islam.”²²

Others were a Nestorian Christian, Hussein Ibn Ishaq, the first principal of Baghdad University (750), Timothy 1 (728-823) who translated Aristotle into Arabic and wrote the classic works of Christian apologetics, *Dialogue with al Mahdi*, which was directed to Muslims, and John of Damascus (675-749) who was the Prime Minister of the Caliph Abdul-Malek in Damascus.²³ In fact, most tolerant and fruitful Christian-Muslim relations were those of Muslim Spain (the emirate of Cordova). Within this period, “Islamic Spain had its share of Christian martyrs, but generally speaking, the Muslim rulers left the Spanish church alone as long as it made no attempts to criticise Islam or convert Muslims.”²⁴

This point is buttressed further by Needham who writes that, “Western Christian scholars often visited the famous Spanish Muslim universities to learn philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine.”²⁵

These illustrations help to provide hints which help us to understand the level of *Boko Haram*’s lack of knowledge of Islamic history, and their manipulation or distortion of Islamic history and the level of indoctrination and brainwashing which they use as tools to misinform and lead many of their followers astray. But as Jesus says, “you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free” (Jn. 8:32). In the case of Nigeria, only the truth of God’s word can save adherents of *Boko Haram* from ignorance and error.

It has been noted by Dan Wooding that “more Christians have died for their faith in this current century than all other centuries of church history combined.”²⁶ Wooding notes that “during this century, we have documented cases in excess of 26 million martyrs. From AD 33 to 1900 we have documented 14 million martyrs.”²⁷

Today there is a global onslaught on Christians and Western interests arising from post-cold war new ideological wars heightened by the rise of political

Publications Trust, London, 2000, p.16.

²¹ N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power*, p.27.

²² *Ibid.*, p.28.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.31.

²⁶ Dan Wooding, “Modern Persecution,” <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1901-20>. p.1. Date retrieved, August 3, 2015.

²⁷ Dan Wooding, “Modern Persecution,” p.2.

Islamism, US occupation of some Muslim nations such as Iraq and Afghanistan, post-Gulf war reaction, continuous Israeli-Palestinian clashes, post-9/11 US attacks in the Middle East and effects of globalisation. In this century, cases of Christian persecution have continued in several countries with more resolve, vehemence and persistence. *Boko Haram* has contributed to Christian persecution in Nigeria and created Christian martyrs.

Effects of *Boko Haram's* activities on Christians in Nigeria

To say that *Boko Haram* has affected all Nigerians in one form or another is not an exaggeration. Their activities have left behind terror, fear, anger, deaths and traumatic experiences. Wherever *Boko Haram* has struck, they have killed many innocent Nigerians, whether Christians or Muslims, and destroyed property and economic investments such as markets and storehouses. They have also attacked and robbed banks, and raided households. From the antics and activities of the *Boko Haram* insurgents, it can be asserted that Christians have suffered most from their horrendous attacks. This paper has given the examples of a few churches that have been bombed or destroyed to illustrate the foregoing assertion.

On Christmas Day, 2011 *Boko Haram* bombed St. Theresa's Catholic Church in Madalla, a satellite town of Abuja and left more than fifty (50) people dead.²⁸ Allen notes that "both the body count and the symbolism of striking on Christmas Day galvanised attention around the world to the threat posed by *Boko Haram*, including its specific menace to Christians."²⁹ The Simon Wiesenthal Centre put it this way: "Picking Christmas Day to murder women and children on the steps of their church was calculated to intimidate all other Nigerian Christians."³⁰ This strategy was repeated on the eve of Christmas in Jos in 2010.

Other churches that have been bombed by *Boko Haram* include All Christians Fellowship Centre in Suleja in 2011; Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church in Jos; St. Finbars' Catholic Church in Jos; COCIN Headquarters Church, Jos; attempted detonation of an IED at ECWA Church, Tudun Wada, Jos in 2015; Christian students attending Sunday service at Bayero University, Kano, where at least 21 people were killed and 20 injured.³¹

Other attacks include killing of Christian worshippers at Deeper Life Bible Church, Okene, where more than twenty Christians were killed. The following churches in Kaduna and Zaria have been bombed: St. Rita's Catholic Church, Malali; St. George's Catholic Church, Wusasa, Zaria; St. Andrew's Protestant

²⁸ John L. Allen Jr., *The Global War on Christians*, p.56.

²⁹ Ibid., p.57.

³⁰ Ibid.,

³¹ Ibid., pp. 58–59, *The New*, August, 2011, p.20.

Church, Jaji Military Cantonment.³²

The city of Jos suffered a number of bombings in 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2015. Many Christians in the northeast have either lost their lives due to *Boko Haram's* activities, or have abandoned their homes and found safe havens in places such as Jos, Kaduna, Abuja, Nasarawa, and some other cities in Nigeria. Most Churches in Yobe state have been destroyed, just as it is the case of some villages in Borno and Adamawa states. At the exit of President Goodluck Jonathan's government in May 2015, towns such as Mubi, Michika, Izge Kana (Borno State), Garkida, Lassa and others were overrun by *Boko Haram* and churches and institutions destroyed.³³ Lamenting this, Dr. Samuel Dali, President of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria (also known as EYN), stated that "a total of 1,431 EYN worship centres have so far been destroyed. 8,038 of our members have been killed, 700,000 have been displaced and the where about of some of them is not known."³⁴ Dali went further to indicate how the EYN had lost some educational institutions in the northeast such as EYN Comprehensive Secondary School, Kulp Bible College, John Gali District Bible School, Minchika, Lagge District Bible School, Chibok District Bible School, Madu Marama District Bible School, and Mauson Technical School at Garkida.³⁵

It can therefore be seen that *Boko Haram* has inflicted severe damage on Christians in Nigeria. For Obed Minchakpu, "the sad thing is that in all these bombings, Christians have been at the receiving end."³⁶ One of the heinous activities of *Boko Haram* which received world condemnation was the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from their hostel at Chibok in Borno state. Statistics show that more than half of these students were Christians which confirms Christian perception that the abduction was actually targeted at them. There are fears and allegation of their forced conversion, forced marriage, and training as suicide bombers.

Christian Responses to *Boko Haram*

Since the emergence of *Boko Haram's* heinous activities in Nigeria, particularly the targeting of Christians for attack, and their resolve to enforce Sharia law and to establish an Islamic caliphate, Christians have confirmed their perception and fears of a grand design against them. For most Christians, their

³² Obed Minchakpu, "*Boko Haram* Bombings and the National Question," *Today's Challenge*, Vol. 11, No. 1, July, 2014, p.6.

³³ *Today's Challenge*, January 2015, p.8.

³⁴ *Verbatim*, May 26, 2014, pp.26-27.

³⁵ *Today's Challenge*, January 2015, p.9.

³⁶ Obed Minchakpu, "*Boko Haram* Bombings and the National Question," *Today's Challenge*, Vol. 11, No. 1, July, 2014, p.6.

experiences since the beginning of *Boko Haram*'s reign of terror has been that of persecution and intense difficulties. But as has been noted earlier, Christians need to respond to *Boko Haram* from a biblical and theological viewpoint informed by references to Christian persecution and trials in church history. John L. Allen Jr. in his book, *The Global War on Christians*, lists ten factors responsible for the present global onslaught against Christians:

- i. Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with 2.2 billion adherents, so its raw numbers on any index are likely to be larger than everyone else's.
- ii. Christianity is experiencing phenomenal growth around the world, especially its evangelical and Pentecostal forms, and much of that growth is coming in dangerous neighbourhoods such as parts of the Asian subcontinent, sub-Saharan Africa, and even regions of the Middle East. In some places, this growth threatens the traditionally dominant position of other religious groups or the state..
- iii. Aside from Islam, most non-Christian religions are not experiencing the same missionary success or don't have the same missionary ambitions. As a result, they don't tend to attract the same attention and resentment. This may actually be the reverse in the case of Nigeria as Christian-Muslim clashes have resulted in some instances due to the competitive evangelizing efforts of contesting for converts. In fact Muslims and *Boko Haram* adherents are opposed to perceived Christian inroads of Muslim dominated areas particularly in Northern Nigeria.
- iv. Some countries with a colonial past are now looking to regain their identity by recovering their pre-colonial, and hence pre-Christian, religious traditions. In so doing, these nations often rely upon legal means to suppress "foreign" religions, especially those identified with Western colonialism. This is relevant and applies to the Nigerian context where Muslims have consistently perceived Christianity and Western colonial values and its symbols as having been imposed upon them.
- v. Many countries are witnessing an increasingly strong connection between nationalism and religion, with Christianity, perceived as a threat to national identity. India and the rise of Hindu nationalism is a classic example.
- vi. Christians in some places have become outspoken advocates for

human rights and democracy, which means they're seen as threats to authoritarian regimes especially since Christians often can plug into international networks of support that most other religious groups don't have.

- vii. Christians in other places challenge well established connections between religion and industry, or even between religion and crime. Reference is made to Latin America of drug barons and mafia bosses.
- viii. In some cases, the basic peacefulness of Christian churches – the fact that most forms of Christianity explicitly reject violence committed in the name of religion may actually invite persecution, because the perpetrators do not have to worry about retribution. This reasoning applies to the Nigerian case as most non-Christians, particularly Muslims in Nigeria argue that Christianity through its holy scriptures, enjoins one “to turn the other cheek” which Jesus gave as their own interpretation or understanding of Matthew 5:39. But some Christians understand this passage as it relates to Nigeria quite differently today as they argue that Christians have been “slapped” more than once and have no third cheek to turn. While there have been reprisal reactions and killings by Christians in Jos and Kaduna, a Christian radical group known as *Akhwat Akwop* in Southern Kaduna State had emerged to counter *Boko Haram* activities.³⁷ The gradual feeling of the need for reprisals by Christians is gaining currency particularly among the Christian youth which need to be stemmed before it snowballs into another major monster. Such development is dangerous to the stability of Nigeria and antithetical to what Jesus taught. Militant youth gang groups in Jos, Kaduna, Kano and areas where *Boko Haram* and ethno-religious conflicts are recurrent experiences. This seems to be the direction of radical Christians particularly the youth in Nigeria today.
- ix. But it is to be noted that Christian attempt to use the sword left an inglorious legacy in Christian history through the crusades which has remained its dark side till date. This salient truth also applied to the call for response by some Christians in the face of wanton killings, attacks, and destruction of their property as we had indicated earlier.
- x. Christians at the local level are often identified with the West, even though that's almost always inaccurate. This observation by Allen is shared by some non-Muslims who hold that Nigeria inherited its

³⁷ *Parliament*, Vol. 5, No. 20, 15th September, 2011, p.12.

system of government from the British colonial administration, which was not only western, but deeply influenced by Christian values. This partly explains one of the bases of *Boko Haram's* struggle and protest.

- xi. The international dimension of Christianity is seen as a danger in totalitarian states where allegiance to the nation is the highest value.³⁸ Allen concluded this section by listing Nigeria among the “most hazardous nations on earth,” based on Open Doors World Watch List in January 2013.³⁹

It is instructive to note that there seems to be a global dimension to attacks on Christians today, which buttresses John L. Allen's thesis. For example, on February 15, 2015, ISIS beheaded 21 Coptic Christians on the Libyan beach, which provoked Egyptian anger, violence and demonstrations. Similarly, on April 2, 2015, Al Shabaab killed 147 Christian students at a Kenyan university. All these in unprovoked circumstances. A parallel could be drawn with the Boko Haram abduction of more than 200 school girls at Chibok, majority of whom are Christians.⁴⁰

Some Nigerian educational institutions have witnessed cases where Christian students have died as a result of targeted persecution or arising from alleged “minor disagreements” or supposed “blasphemy” by Christian students.⁴¹ The claim by Muslims who employ blasphemy charges in order to incriminate Christians in the persecution nets has become more common in Nigeria. When blasphemy claims are made without theological basis by competent religious authorities and leaders, it gives room for abuse and violation of people's rights to fair hearing and right to life as has been witnessed in Nigeria.

The Bible provides several hints that can help us in responding to Christian persecution today, and which provides insight to Nigerian Christians in dealing with *Boko Haram*. Jesus spoke about persecution to his disciples before the week of his passion. In John 15:20b, Jesus said, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” Also, in Matthew 10:22: “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” And in John 16:2: “They will put you out of the synagogue, in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.” It could be said

³⁸ John L. Allen Jr., *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches From the Frontlines of Anti-Christian Persecution*, Image, New York, 2013, pp. 38-40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Danjuma Auta and Ralph Madugu, “School Girls Abduction: Conspiracy Against Christians,” *Today's Challenge*, Vol. 10, No.1. 2014, p.12-14.

⁴¹ VShehu Sani, *The Killing Fields*, pp. 67, 95, 96, 97, 99, 135, 169-170, 171, 172.

that Jesus' words have not only been fulfilled, as Christians have not only been chased out of their synagogues, (in our own case, churches) but churches have been burnt, and Christians killed by the Boko Haram Islamic insurgents and other similar persecutors of Christians who believe that they are on God's assignment and they await eternal reward in the hereafter. Paul re-emphasises Jesus' words in 2 Timothy 3:12: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

But the Bible also provides ways for Christians to cope with persecution. In Romans 12:14, Paul enjoins that Christians "bless those who persecute you, bless do not curse." He writes in 1 Corinthians 4:12, "When we are cursed, we bless, when we are persecuted, we endure it." James 1:2 says, "Consider it joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds." And 1 Peter 4:16: "However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." The apostle Peter adds, "If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of their punishment" (2 Peter 2:9).

It is clear from the scriptures cited above that the Bible expects Christians to face persecution and trials, bless those who persecute them, and endure persecution, as God will punish the persecutors. In fact, Christians are expected to respond in certain ways to their enemies and those who want to exterminate them. They are contained in biblical exhortations on forgiveness, peace and reconciliation. Isaiah 32:17-18 says, "The fruit of righteousness will be peace, the effect of righteousness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, undisturbed places of rest." Isaiah saw the Messiah (fulfilled in Jesus Christ) as the "prince of peace" (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus told his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the peace makers for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:9). And, Jesus said that what he was leaving with the disciples was peace (John 14:27).

The apostle Paul also enjoined Christians to "live in peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18), and described the gospel as the gospel of peace (Romans 10:15, Ephesians 6:15, I Thessalonians 5:23, cf Acts 10:36). James 3:19 says, "Peace makers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." Paul advises Christians that "if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay' says the Lord." This verse is especially relevant and timely for Christians in Nigeria who are continuously faced with incessant ethno-religious crises and *Boko Haram* attacks.

On forgiveness, both the Old and New Testaments provide bases for forgiveness. Jesus' life was the prime example of forgiveness and he commanded that Christians should go the extra-mile by not only loving their enemies, but praying for them (Matthew 5:44). Jesus said that Christians should forgive "seventy seven times" (Matthew 8:21). In other words, forgiveness should have no limits.

Christians need to forgive perpetrators of *Boko Haram* insurgents in Nigeria just as some world figures and heroes have left indelible marks in history today because of their show of forgiveness. They include Nelson Mandela and Kim Phuc, a Vietnamese war survivor.

Elsewhere, I have argued that, “nations that have experienced conflicts and wars, particularly in Africa such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote D'Ivoire and Rwanda, have been brought together again to work for peace and development by achieving forgiveness and reconciliation.”⁴² Survivors of the Rwandan genocide have had to embrace forgiveness and reconciliation in the effort to rebuild their nation. Eric Irvuzumugabe, writing on the Rwandan experience, remarked, “Forgive even when it doesn't make sense.”⁴³

Forgiveness leads to reconciliation. Christians in Nigeria must be guided by the biblical injunction on forgiveness and reconciliation in their response to *Boko Haram* insurgents. This is one of the seemingly difficult biblical teachings to apply in conflict stricken societies. Jesus enjoined Christians to reconcile with their adversaries (Matthew 5:25). Paul saw Christians as commissioned with a message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). As shown earlier, some African nations that have experienced conflicts have embraced the path of reconciliation to great benefit. Only reconciliation can heal the wounds of hatred, anger and vengefulness that have characterised some Christian responses to ethno-religious crises and *Boko Haram* insurgency in Nigeria.

Some demonstrations arising from bombings of Christian targets have easily been suppressed and there is no recourse to the law courts to adjudicate in such matters. In fact, since the introduction of Sharia in Nigeria from 1999, Nigerian law and its constitutional provisions of “freedom of worship” and the “secularity clause” have not been invoked in court. This, I see as the Christian failure to muster courage to confront what most Nigerians see as “sensitive,” “controversial” and “no go areas,” which smacks of hypocrisy from us all.

It is to be noted however that Christians have not collaborated enough with other national and international platforms to call for cessation of *Boko Haram* activities in Nigeria. Women have organised demonstrations to call for peace and halt the killings in Jos and its environs such as Dogo Na Hauwa, Kwall, Maza, and other places. The Bring Back Our Girls Campaign (BBOGC) group which has called for the rescue of the Chibok girls abducted by *Boko Haram* does not seem to receive broader support from the Christian population in Nigeria. A massive well mobilized Christian youth and women campaign

⁴² Gwamna Dogara Je'adayibe, “Christian-Muslim Relations and Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria: A Biblical and Qur'anic Perspective,” A Paper Presented at the NABIS Conference held in Port-Harcourt, 7th – 12th July, 2015, p.20.

⁴³ Eric Irvuzumugabe, *My Father, Maker of Trees: How I Survived the Rwanda Genocide*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2009, p.164.

would have added tremendous steam to the BBOGC. Christians have also failed to collaborate with other non-Christians, especially Muslims who have condemned *Boko Haram's* activities and are committed to peace and harmony in Nigeria; some of these Muslims have in the process become targets of the *Boko Haram* insurgents.

Christians need to join hands with others in advocacy to condemn *Boko Haram* and engage in relief efforts, just as the Catholic Diocese of Jos, Anglican Communion, and some few others have done. Christians need to be commended in the way they have reacted to the *Boko Haram* insurgency. They have reacted calmly and waited for government's intervention to stop the menace. There has also been outright condemnation of *Boko Haram* activities through channels such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN); individual churches and denominations have equally issued statements condemning *Boko Haram's* activities.

It is to be noted that women have suffered the most from the murderous activities of *Boko Haram*. Women have become widows and their children reduced to orphans. Many women have been abducted, raped, and forced into marriage. President of EYN, Dr. Samuel Dali, recalls how on escape from one *Boko Haram* invasion, survivors had to trek long distances in the nights and some pregnant women had to give birth in the bush without any assistance.⁴⁴ Their children have experienced hunger, malnutrition, disease and exposure to all kinds of hazards. Most of these women have experienced psychological trauma and torture. Some have been exposed to health hazards as some fleeing from *Boko Haram* were bitten by snakes, resulting in their deaths.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The current experience with *Boko Haram* insurgency in Nigeria calls for Christian involvement in purposeful politics, which Yusuf Obaje calls “politics of redemption.” This involves using biblical principles which promote development, justice and transformation. It also involves politics that is godly and Christ-centred. Responsible Christian participation in politics will help to influence decisions that affect Nigerian citizens, particularly Christians, as they will also help to legislate laws that are not inimical to their own interests. Such Christian involvement will help to address persistent leadership crisis in Nigeria and other forms of leadership failures which the *Boko Haram* have exploited to perpetrate evil.

The church needs to speak with a united voice on *Boko Haram* using all its organs such as CAN, PFN and other platforms to concertedly call for

⁴⁴ “EYN Church has been completely uprooted from the North-East – President, *Today's Challenge*, January, 2015, p.19.

⁴⁵ *Today's Challenge*, March-April, 2015, pp.7-10.

immediate action on Christian persecution in Nigeria. More importantly, Christians need to exhibit love, forgiveness and reconciliation just as the Bible teaches, even as we pray for the complete eradication of *Boko Haram* in our time.